[Social-Ethnic Trends]

Beliefs and Customs - Folkstuff

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Title Social - Ethic Trends

Place of origin Portland, Oregon Date 1/3/39

Project worker A. C. Sherbert

Project editor

Remarks L [Reminiscences?]

W1227

Form A

Circumstances of Interview

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker A. C. Sherbert. Date January 3, 1939

Address Project Office

Subject Folklore & Social Ethnics Trends

Name and address of informant Louis Schmacher, 1204 N. E. 53d Avenue,

Portland, Oregon.

Date and time of interview December 27, P.M. December 28, P.M.

Place of interview Informant's place of business, corner Third and Main Sts.

Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant

Howard McK Corning, from item in Oregon Journal, Portland.

Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you None

Description of room, house, surroundings, etc. Interview conducted in furrier's workshop in rear of salesroom. Salesroom modestly equipped and occupies major portion of single store building. Workshop an organized clutter of furrier's tools and implements, raw furs, finished furs, and fur garments in various stages of completion.

Form B

Personal History of Informant

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker A. C, Sherbert Date January 3, 1939.

Address Project Office.

Subject Folklore and Social-Ethnic Trends,

Name and address of informant Louis Schumacher, 1204 N.E. 53d Avenue,

Portland, Oregon.

Information obtained should supply the following facts:

1. Ancestry

2. Place and date of birth

3. Family

4. Places lived in, with dates

5. Education, with dates

6. Occupations and accomplishments with dates

7. Special skills and interests

8. Community and religious activities

9. Description of informant

10. Other points gained in interview

1. Not known.

2. Baden, Germany, December 6, 1868.

3. Five girls and four boys - Esther, Frieda, Bertha, Louisa, Lillian; Carl, Fred, Ben and George.

4. Baden, Germany, 1868 to 1882. Walla, Wash., 1882 to 1887. U. S. Army in Arizona, 1887 to 1889. U. S. Army, Walla, Wash., 1889 to 1891. Tacoma, Washington 1891. Portland, Oregon 1892 and thereafter.

5. Elementary schools in Germany.

6. Cavalry training in U. S. Army - Expert furrier thereafter.

7. Interested in hiking and mountain climbing -skilled when younger.

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8. Methodist Sunday school teacher and superintendent for 46 years.

9. Slight of build, gray or hair, firm of feature; active, quick in movement, erect in carriage.

10. Because of exemplary habits, informant missed the spice and color which centered around the livelier haunts of western men of a couple of generations ago. Abiding by the tenants of his religion, he never attended a dance in his life, thumbing his bible while

others danced the schottische and polka. He knew what went on in Portland's early-day famous, or infamous, resorts only by hearsay, or what he could see from the fresh-air side of the swinging doors.

Form C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker A. C. Sherbert Date January 3, 1939.

Address Project Office

Subject Folklore and Social - Ethnic Trends

Name and address of informant Louis Schumacher, 1204 N. E. 53d Avenue, Portland, Oregon.

Text:

I was born 70 years ago in Baden, Germany, not far from the famous comic - opera town of Heidelberg. As a young lad I thought Heidelberg was the center of the universe, and I guess I wasn't far wrong, either, at that time, because before the World War, Heidelberg was a recognized center for the world's best artists, greatest musicians, and most celebrated scientists, doctors, and teachers. I suppose all that's changed now, in fact I know it is, from what I read and learn from people who have been over there in recent years.

All the schooling that I received, I got in Baden before I was fourteen years of age. My education probably corresponded to what would be called 'grammar school' in this country. I'm not making too many apologies for the extent of my schooling, though, because when I came to this country at the age of fourteen, it wasn't often that a common jerker met an American who had very much education. Things weren't quite so easy fifty-five or sixty years ago as they are today. Not many persons thought it was necessary to have a college degree in order to earn a living. Most young fellows were expected to learn some kind of a trade - that is, unless they were living on a farm - and the sooner they could begin learning their trades the better. Strangely enough, I left Germany before being apprenticed 2 out in a trade, like most German boys were. If I had been, my later life would perhaps have been an entirely different story.

When I am asked if there has been any excitement in ny life, I have to laugh. Sure there has. I think you would have to look a long way until you found any man 70 years on this old earth, who hasn't had his share of excitement. Of course some folks run into more excitement than others, and what I might call the exciting incidents of my life might not seem exciting to others who have had more exciting things happen to them. When I think back, it was even exciting coming over to America on a ship, in those days. It took weeks to come across. They make it now in four days. The little ships of those times were so long on the way over that they were almost certain to run into at least one bad storm, before they reached this side. And the ships were so small compared to today's big floating cities, that even a small storm seemed big enough to suit anyone.

Upon landing in this country I headed straight for Walla, Washington, where I had friends. I did farm work and short-time jobs, but didn't find anything that I liked at first. At the age of eighteen I decided I would like to be a soldier, so I enlisted in the U, S. Army, and was sent to Arizona, where I soldiered / for two years with Troup H, 4th Calvary. After two years in Arizona my outfit was transferred to Walla Walla, which suited me fine. I have always been very proud of my four years in the Army.

One exciting incident which occurred during my service in the Army, though it didn't happen to me and I had no part in it, I always like to repeat: In the 90's, Walla was a wide-open town — gambling houses and all sorts of rowdy places in operation night and day. Walla was a military post town, and the soldiers went a long way toward supporting these sporting places. At the time this incident happened, I was on furlough in Portland. On January 8, 1891, one of my 3 buddies, a trooper from 4th Cavalry, was shot through the stomach by a gambler named Hunt, in a gambling house. My buddie died a couple of days later. He was well liked by the rest of my buddies and they were so riled up over the shooting that they swore to get the gambler if it was the last thing they did. Hunt was in the jail in Walla Walla, but some of his friends were raising money to get him bailed out. This made the soldiers madder than ever, and they decided to do something about it. Although the post commander had forbid any trooper to go into the town of Walla Walla, about sixty soldiers went to town with their carbines on their shoulders, and demanded that the sheriff turn Hunt over to them. The sheriff refused to give them the key to Hunt's cell, so the troopers threatened to dynamite the jail. The sheriff finally decided that the soldiers meant business and thought he might as well give them the key, as to refuse and have them carry out their threat. My buddies took Hunt outside onto the jail lawn at 1 o'clock in the morning, and dropped him with a volley from their carbines. Following the affair the colonel of our regiment was demoted, as punishment for his laxity in the matter, though it really wasn't his fault in any way.

I was mustered out of the army, April 8, 1891, with the rank of sergeant. I worked for a few months at various jobs around Walla Walla, after which I went to Tacoma to look for work. I wasn't able to find anything to do in Tacoma, so I came to Portland. And here's a thing that always puzzles anyone who interviews me and asks when I left Tacoma and when I came to Portland. I always say I left Tacoma in 1891, and then when they ask “When did you came to Portland?” I answer, “in 1892”. They ask, “Where did you go in the meantime?” And I smilingly answer, “no place - I came directly from Tacoma to Portland.” No one seems to think such a thing could be possible, but it's all very simple! I left Tacoma

a few minutes before midnight New Year's eve of 1891 and was on the train en route to Portland while the new year was being ushered in. When I arrived in Portland it 4 was 1892, of course.

When I got my first glimpse of Portland it was a hustling town of probably sixty thousand people, or so. Sidewalks were wooden, streets were plank, wood-block, or mud. A horse-car line ran the length of Third street. The chief topic of conversation was the flood, which they had experienced a short while before I came here. Portland seemed to be pretty busy and everyone seemed to have jobs at that time, though all over the country a panic was beginning to grow worse and worse, reaching a climax in 1893. I landed a job right away, helping to build the old cable carline that used to run up to Portland Heights. When this job petered out I got a job working on the new Bull Run water pipeline.

Another exciting incident in my life, which came to me because of my army training, happened when I answered an advertisement in the paper which read: 'Wanted: Young man, ex-cavalryman preferred'. Well, that was me, so I answered the ad. A bank had been robbed in the east and the robbers were supposed to have hidden somewhere in eastern Oregon. I was sworn in as a deputy sheriff and my job was to help run down the robbers and murderers - they had killed a bank official during the robbery. I went to The Dallas and from there, with several other deputies, we left on horseback for the vicinity of Condon, where we captured the robbers. They were sent back east to stand trial, but were released for lack of evidence. Well that ended that job and I was once more looking for work.

I wasn't very well satisfied with myself at about this point in my life. Here was I, a big strong lad, not getting any younger and no trade learned yet. I had a lot of different kinds of experience but none that you could call a real trade or that you could hope to build much of a future on. I came to the decision that I would have to start at the bottom in some good business, and learn all there was to know about it, if I wanted to get any place in this world. I also 5 made up my mind that I wouldn't be too particular about wages until I had learned whatever trade I decided to go into. My chance came when the Silverfield Fur

Company, of Portland, wanted a young man to learn fur cutting. They offered me the job and I took it. I've never been sorry. The fur business is very exciting and it isn't everyone who can make good at it. It is also one of the most highly competitive businesses there are. You can either make a lot of money in it, or, if you don't know your stuff, you can go broke in one season of bad buying. I worked for the Silverfield Fur Co., for ten years, and then went into business for myself.

I hadn't worked for the Silverfield's very long before they began to realize that I caught on to the fur business quickly. Lots of crooked work in buying pelts, but it wasn't long until I could tell to a plugged penny what a pelt was worth. In 1897 they trusted me with my first really important job: - Going to Alaska to buy seal furs directly from the Indians. I made numerous trips for them after that, until I started business for myself. And so my future was finally mapped out for me. I was to become a furrier to stick to the business for the rest of my days. No more running around from pillar to post doing odd jobs. In 1893, with the security of a fairly good job and fine prospects for the future, I decided it was high time I got married. I had found the girl of my choice - Elizabeth Hagar, a Swiss, born in Canton Berne, Switzerland, and employed in the household of the Ladd family. We were married February 24, 1893 by Reverend George Bauer. We raised a fine family of nine children, all living and doing well. Christmas 1938 there were forty-four of us, children, grand children, and in-laws, gathered around the Schumacher Christmas tree. Not bad, eh? In 1904 I quit my job with Silverfield's and opened a small shop for myself at the west end of the old Madison bridge. It was quite a struggle at first, but I had acquired a small following and I worked 6 hard, night and day — I had to, because the stork was beginning to camp on our doorstep and my responsibilities were rapidly multiplying. My oldest son, Fred, thought he would like the fur business, so I broke him in to the business as soon as he was through school. Fred is now, I claim, one of the most expert furriers in the Northwest. My son Carl, is also associated with me in the fur business, and does a great deal of our buying and selling. I have the honor of being the oldest active furrier in the city of Portland.

As I said before, my first buying trip to Alaska was in 1897. I made annual trips to Alaska from that year until 1923, when I went on my last buying expedition - 25 trips in all. Many people envy me the experiences I had in Alaska. Alaska was, and is, a beautiful country. I used to visit Sitka, Ketchikan and Juneau. I bought my furs directly from the Aleut Indians. The Aleuts are funny people. They are very proud. Proud of their race. Proud of their accomplishments and abilities. You must not call them “Indians”, that is, if you intend doing business with them. They insist an being called “natives”. They are easily offended and many a fur buyer cooked his own goose and went home empty handed because he did or said something to one of them that went against the grain. No amount of money will induce them to trade their furs with anyone they don't like. I always got along well with them because I tried to do business their way. For instance - The Aleuts positively would not trade for gold. They insisted that they be paid for their furs with silver dollars. Now this was quite a nuisance as you can imagine. If you went out with the intention of buying five hundred or a thousand dollars' worth of furs in a day you had to pack along a pretty heavy load of silver dollars. Ever try to pick up and carry a thousand silver dollars? No? Well it's quite a weighty chunk. In those days, gold coins were common in the Northwest; in fact, more business transactions took place with gold than any other medium. Paper money was practically non-existent 7 existent, and silver was common though used only for small purchases and in change for gold coins of higher denominations. Many fur buyers simply would not cater to the Aleuts' desire for silver money. They blusteringly intended to teach the Indians that the gold coin was legal tender and they would have to take it, or else. But the Indian refused to be taught, and the stubborn fur buyer got no furs. I learned early in the game, that if I was to make a success of the fur buying business I would have to face the situation as it was, and not to try to change things. I subsequently learned the Aleut habits and customs very thoroughly, and also came to know the country up there like I knew the back of my hand. I never could understand how a buyer could go to all the trouble and expense of a trip from Portland, San Francisco, or Seattle, to Alaska, and then hold a penny so close to his eye that he couldn't see the dollar at arm's length. A case in point: I once went out to do some buying in company with another fur buyer from

the States. He was addicted to the habit of snuffing - rubbing snuff into his nose. The Aleut women chew snuff, when they can get it. Young Aleut girls are very beautiful and slender and more or less careful about their persons. Their beauty fades quickly, however, following maturity. They get fat, waddly, and more or less unshapely. As soon as they begin to reach the stage of fat womanhood, they settle down to the tasks and habits of the older women. Then they begin to chew snuff. This buyer and myself were passing an Aleut house before which two maturing girls stood. At this moment, my friend chanced to pull out his snuff box to take a pinch of snuff. The girls smiled and motioned to him to come on over and give them some. He refused. I said, 'go on over and give them some of your snuff.' “Not me,” he said, “Louis if I were to hand them my snuff box they would scoop out every bit of it, and I know because I have seen them do it to others,” I said, “You damn fool, what of it. Here we are, going out to buy furs from their people and you are running the risk of having these girls spread the story that we are “tight”. Give them some of 8 your snuff. When we get back to town I'll see that you get your snuff box filled again and plenty to spare.” He said, “Alright, Louis, but just watch what they do to my snuff.” He walked over and held out his snuff box to them, and sure enough, each in turn scooped out a generous handful and crammed it into her mouth, while thanking him profusely. “What did I tell you, Louis,” he said, showing me a practically empty snuff box.

I claim I proved my points however. Wouldn't it be foolish to let five or ten cents' worth of snuff stand in the way of friendship with these people? Such shortsightedness often meant the difference between a successful buying trip and one of no profit at all. Here was another thing that proved the downfall of many unsuccessful fur buyers: The Aleuts lived in square, one-room houses. Each was a duplicate of the others: a big room with a stove in the center, and a few chairs here and there around the room. Sometimes there were no chairs, but boxes to sit on instead. The one room served as living-room, dining room, bedroom and kitchen, for a large family. The Aleuts are very polite and courteous to anyone they invite into their homes. I found that if they invited me in, I had better go, or else they mould be insulted. Many inexperienced buyers would approach the threshold,

get one whiff of the interior, and then refuse to enter. Needless to say, their fur-buying expedition was doomed to dismal failure. However, you could not blame a white man for not wanting to go inside. These Aleut homes invariably stunk to high heaven. The Aleut diet consisted chiefly of fish, fish-oil, fish cakes, fish meal, and just plain fish. Rancid fish oil is perhaps one of the most offensive smells a fellow can bump into. Blend this with the smell of fat, unwashed, bodies of squaws and bucks, and dirty, runny-nosed papooses - then toss a pile of curing hides and pelts in a corner of the room, and you have an Aleut home.

In spite of the above description of an Aleut home, the Aleuts were quite modern and not like the Indians of Oregon and Washington of that day. When I first 9 went up there, Sitka was a flourishing town. The Aleuts were missionaried and civilized by the Russians as far back as the year 1800. Most of the Indians are members of the Greek Catholic church, which was once the principal religion of Russia. Some of the Greek churches are very beautiful inside and exhibit relics and carvings, statues, etc., that would make some of our Portland art look pretty cheap and insignifant. I made regular trips up to Alaska during the gold rush, but somehow I escaped getting hit by the gold fever and stuck to the fur business. I have always been glad that I did, for I knew many people who went up there to get rich and lost all that they had earned the hard way down here.

The Aleuts divide their year into three fairly sharply defined seasons or periods; Winter and early spring are given to trapping; late spring and early summer are spent gathering wood; and late summer and fall are devoted to fishing and sealing. The Indian women are expert at making baskets from sea weed. These baskets are much finer in weave and workmanship than the finest panama hats. So fine are they woven that they hold water without leaking a single drop, although they are not treated with wax, pitch or anything that would make them waterproof. Even a small basket takes a squaw a long time to make. I was amused one time when a touring man and wife stopped before an exhibit of native baskets. The women thought a small basket was very pretty and asked the Indian how much it was. The Indian said, “That basket twenty-five.” The woman's husband, apparently

well-to-do and puffing on a big cigar, indifferently flipped a twenty-five cent piece on the counter in front of the imperturbable Aleut, who never even made a move to reach for the coin. The tourist was jolted out of his indifference and quickly registered respect for the small basket when the Aleut spoke, “No cents - twenty-five dollars for basket.”

Sealing off the Alaska coast used to be anybody's game, but for a good many 10 years now, the Indians are the only ones who are allowed to catch fur seals and they are only allowed to spear them. It's a sort of government monopoly. Fur seals are not quite so important now, though, because Hudson seal (made from muskrat) has largely superseded the real seal. Speaking of seals, their mortal enemy in Alaska are the killer whales. No one was more surprised than I was when Portland's famous whale of a few years ago came up the Columbia. That whale certainly must have lost its bearings because I never heard of a killer whale coming so far south before. The Aleuts call them “black fish.” They are very dangerous and fierce fighters. They make quick work of the seals which they find swimming out away from shore. These killer whales, which seldom grow to more than 25 feet in length, will attack the big sulphur bottom whales and kill them off quite as easily as they attack any smaller fish. They reach right into the big whale's jaws and bite out the tongue - they also cut and slash the big whale's throat and belly until it dies either from wounds or starvation.

What furs did I buy on my trips to Alaska? Mink, otter, blue, gray, red, black and white fox, lynx, martin, wolverine (the wolverine is the strongest animal in the world for its size), Kodiak bear skins, sea otters and fur seal. The Kodiak bear is a huge animal that weighs as much as 2,500 pounds. The skin of this bear was highly popular as a floor rug. I brought many of them back in the early days, but no one would think of having one of them on their parlor floor now. The sea otter was always an expensive fur. In the old days they cost as much as $150.00 to $200.00 dollars, which was very high then, but now they are virtually extinct and prime pelts bring from $1250.00 to $1500.00 dollars each. Mink is another fur that has increased a great deal in price. In those days we paid around $1.25 for a good pelt - they are worth from eight to ten dollars now. Muskrat pelts were 11

worth 5¢ in those days. We pay $1.00 a piece for them now, although the all time high for muskrat was during the war, when they went up to five dollars.

I have seen many changes in the fur business since I have been in it, but the most significant change, of course, was the effect artificial or synthetic furs had on the trade. Before 1900 there were no artificial furs. Furs were the real, genuine thing. Seal was seal, mink was mink, otter was otter. Since the turn of the century, however, almost any kind of natural fur has been duplicated by Lord-only-knows how many different methods. In many cases, the artificial product is almost, if not quite, as good as the genuine article. Take, for instance, Hudson Seal. My son, who is an expert in his own right, claims that Hudson Seal is superior in texture, appearance, and durability, to real seal. Probably because I'm still old fashioned, I argue that real seal is better. Who wins the argument? That's an open question. Hudson seal is made from muskrat. We do the preliminary work on the muskrat pelts in our own shop. The pelts have many thousands of coarse, long hairs, which we call 'guide hairs'. These have to be pulled out, one by one. When the guide hairs are removed that leaves the short, fine, beautiful hair from which the garment is made. We have to send the pelts back to New York to be dyed. Nobody here on the coast knows how it is done - it's a secret process which originated in Germany. In recent years most every kind of fur that ever grew on any kind of animal has been cleverly duplicated in appearance by the use of rabbit skins. Of late years the fox has been raised in captivity for fur. There is quite a little turnover in fox fur at present. The latest fur bearing animal to be domesticated is the mink. Quite a few mink farms have sprung up in Oregon lately. Most people do not think of Oregon as much of a trapping country in this day and age, but as a matter of fact there is quite a lot of trapping going on here. We buy furs every day from Oregon trappers. Oregon still produces 12 muskrat, martin, mink, raccoon, skunk, otter, red and gray fox, and there used to be a lot of beaver, but beaver trapping is now closed to trappers in Oregon by law. Coyote skins also come in fair volume. Coyote fur is too heavy for a garment but makes very beautiful neck pieces.

Do I think the world is getting any better? Well, hardly. You may take these days - I'll take the 'good old days.' I'm inclined to think that the good old days were really the good old days. Human nature hasn't changed a whole lot, though, with the passing of the years, at least as we see it in the fur business. You have to watch both ends of every deal or you'll come out of the little end of the horn. Radio has made it possible for the trappers to know exactly what their pelts are worth before they bring them in to us. A thing that always strikes me as remarkable, though, is the fact that when the price of a certain kind of fur declines, the fellow who brings his pelts in hasn't heard about the price falling. That's always the time his radio goes dead, or something, I guess.

Does my mind ever wander back to the Germany in which I was born? Oh, yes, occasionally. I guess we needn't discuss the changes that have taken place over there since I was a boy in Baden. Speaking of Germany, however, here's a coincidence that seems remarkable to me and probably will to you: My son Fred was a soldier in the World War. He fought with the 8th Infantry and rose to the rank of sergeant. It was his luck to be in the Army of Occupation after the war ended and he was stationed in Germany for a year after the signing of the armistice. During his service in Germany he traveled frequently to Baden, where he visited my aged father, his grandfather, whom he had never seen and never would have seen had it not been for the war. My father was very pleased to see his grandson even though this grandson bore arms against the country in which my father spent his entire life. Fred was at my father's side when the old man passed away.